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Pagan Survivals, Superstitions and Popular Cultures in Early Medieval Pastoral Literature (review)

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Pagan Survivals, Superstitions and Popular Cultures in Early Medieval Pastoral Literature (review)

Abstract

This is a broad and deeply researched study, but also a carefully limited one. Bernadette Filotas wants to examine popular religion and culture across [End Page 206] five centuries, from roughly 500 to 1000, or, as she neatly puts it, from the episcopacy of Caesarius of Arles to that of Burchard of Worms. Caesarius, in her view, did much to “set the tone” for later Christian authorities’ encounters with popular culture (p. 1), while Burchard, in his *Decretum*, provided something of a capstone to a certain kind of cultural interaction. By the beginning of the eleventh century, most of the lands of western Europe had been Christianized or re-Christianized. That is, the cultural dominance of Roman Christianity had been reasserted after an influx of Germanic peoples. Filotas acknowledges that these dates, like so much else concerning the complex process of early medieval Christianization, could be the subject of fierce debate, but rather than defend her choice of periodization ad nauseam, she simply (and wisely) states her case and moves on.

Disciplines

Cultural History | European History | History of Religion | Medieval History | Other History

Comments

This is a book review from *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 2 (2007): 206, doi:10.1353/mrw.0.0047. Posted with permission.

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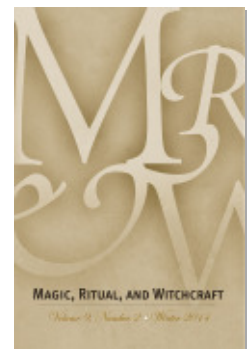
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Pagan Survivals, Superstitions and Popular Cultures in Early Medieval Pastoral Literature (review)

Michael D. Bailey

Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft, Volume 2, Number 2, Winter 2007, pp.
206-209 (Review)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press
DOI: 10.1353/mrw.0.0047



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arguments. Some seek to make fairly broad points about the lasting effects of the classical tradition, while many are much more narrowly focused, often dealing with specific texts and the classical references made in them (a number of the articles provide editions or extensive textual commentary).

This is a volume into which experts will want to dip for the chapters touching on their particular expertise or areas of research, and especially for scholars working in areas of learned medieval magic there will be many riches to be found here. The collection's value to the more general reader seeking some kind of introduction to the theme of classical influence on medieval magic will invariably be less. Some contributions raise broad points. William Ryan's chapter has already been mentioned in this regard. Richard Kieckhefer also contributes a masterful distillation of the ways in which the "Renaissance" magic of Ficino or Pico della Mirandola did and did not differ, in its use of classical sources, from "medieval" magic. And, of course, even the most focused and technical of the chapters illustrate or illuminate certain broad points. Sophie Page, for example, notes a "precociously" early example of Neoplatonic influence in an English magical text, while Jan Veenstra effectively illustrates the variable nature of angelology by contrasting two texts. Yet in giving their contributors such a free hand, the editors have produced a volume of fine parts that, short of the overarching focus provided by the title, does not especially cohere into a complete whole.

As it was explicitly the editors' intent to give their contributors broad freedom, rather than force them into procrustean beds of some stricter framework or organization, I hardly intend this as a criticism. I mean simply to let readers know what they will find in this volume, and what they will not. That a volume in the Warburg colloquia series would be aimed more at a specialized audience than a general readership will hardly be surprising. Neither will be the fact that such a volume contains gems of detailed and precise scholarship.

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BERNADETTE FILOTAS. *Pagan Survivals, Superstitions and Popular Cultures in Early Medieval Pastoral Literature*. Studies and Texts 151. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2005. Pp. xii + 438.

This is a broad and deeply researched study, but also a carefully limited one. Bernadette Filotas wants to examine popular religion and culture across

five centuries, from roughly 500 to 1000, or, as she neatly puts it, from the episcopacy of Caesarius of Arles to that of Burchard of Worms. Caesarius, in her view, did much to “set the tone” for later Christian authorities’ encounters with popular culture (p. 1), while Burchard, in his *Decretum*, provided something of a capstone to a certain kind of cultural interaction. By the beginning of the eleventh century, most of the lands of western Europe had been Christianized or re-Christianized. That is, the cultural dominance of Roman Christianity had been reasserted after an influx of Germanic peoples. Filotas acknowledges that these dates, like so much else concerning the complex process of early medieval Christianization, could be the subject of fierce debate, but rather than defend her choice of periodization ad nauseam, she simply (and wisely) states her case and moves on.

She is equally efficient in dispatching the various problems that swirl around the notion of “popular” religion or culture. Was there, in fact, a distinct “popular culture” in this period, essentially pagan and folkish, wholly separate from the Christian and classical culture of governing elites? Despite her title, Filotas does not think so. She recognizes that folkloric and quasi-pagan elements interwove themselves through all levels of early medieval society in a multitude of complex ways. Yet she suggests that “popular” culture is a convenient shorthand for those cultural elements that authorities identified as separate from legitimate Christian culture, generally ascribing to them pagan origins, and thus subjecting them to censure and condemnation. Across the five centuries with which she is concerned, Christian authors repeatedly discussed the same sorts of illicit beliefs and practices. In their writings, they constructed a separate, “popular” culture even if no such entity ever truly or fully existed.

This is a study rigorously restricted to its source base. Filotas has chosen to survey the pastoral literature of the early Middle Ages because, while she recognizes its often prescriptive nature, she nevertheless holds that it was “the only form of literature concerned directly, if seldom, with the beliefs and rituals of ordinary men and women” (p. 9). The breadth of the literature surveyed is impressive. The annotated listing of primary sources at the end of the book runs to no less than twenty pages (pp. 365–84). Yet all of these sources, she notes, contain only about two thousand mostly brief passages dealing with the beliefs and practices of ordinary people. In the end, for five centuries and all the lands of western Europe, this is not much to go on, and Filotas also notes the staggering array of aspects of common life never touched on by any of these sources. In her words, “the routine of daily life is almost wholly absent: cooking and brewing magic, magic to restore virginity and to determine the sex of babies, the rituals of pregnancy, childbirth and

puberty.” We learn nothing about “charcoal burners, wood-cutters, miners, fishermen, sailors (a notoriously superstitious crew), smiths (with their strongly magical antecedents), potters, tanners, wheelwrights, peddlers, beggars, thieves and prostitutes” (p. 359).

In the end, this book is really (and probably necessarily) a study of the concerns of early medieval churchmen regarding what they viewed as superstitious, often pagan elements persisting in their society, rather than a study of that society directly. And here we come to the heart of Filotas’s limitation. The repeatedly stated concerns of churchmen are only a useful source for the study of popular religion if one accepts that they at least somewhat accurately reflect real beliefs or practices. Many scholars are extremely skeptical of this, noting how strongly earlier sources (for example, the sermons of Caesarius of Arles) influenced later ones. They see in all of this material not a reflection, however distorted, of everyday life, but only a self-perpetuating literary tradition. Filotas believes that “these assessments are surely too pessimistic” (p. 46), and she may be right. There are good reasons to think that busy ecclesiastical authorities did not spend their time simply reformulating old and irrelevant condemnations, but must, over the course of five centuries, have occasionally taken note of what people were actually doing. Yet when one source describes a ritual in which a child is placed on a roof (*tectum*) and another describes an identical ritual in which the child is placed in a bed (*lectum*), it seems suspiciously like a matter of scribal error rather than closely observed differences in actual practice (p. 262).

For all that this issue of how the sources relate to real, and surely ever-changing, common practices hangs over the whole of Filotas’s book, she does not engage with it at great length, and she need not, for there is one final limitation that she imposes on herself. The interpretation of her sources, the variations they contain, and so the degree to which they represent real practices or inherited rhetoric is not her primary concern (p. 11). Rather she intends mainly to list and describe, in various categories, all the references to superstition, idolatry, and potential paganism that she has found in these sources. Here and there she enters into some analysis of how a particular passage or variation may have arisen, or what actual practices it may mask. But mostly she describes what the sources recount. Inevitably, one wishes for more. But given the limitations of the sources, the deeply contentious nature of the issues any extended analysis would raise, and the fact that so little work has been done in this area before, one understands the choice and is grateful for the copious material Filotas has brought together. This is a book that can truly be described as fundamental: it will be a necessary basis for all future

scholars working on early medieval superstition or common religious practices.

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GUSTAV HENNINGSEN, ED. *The Salazar Documents: Inquisitor Alonso de Salazar Frías and Others on the Basque Witch Persecution*. Leiden: Brill, 2004. Pp. 512.

In 1980 the Danish folklorist Gustav Henningsen published *The Witches' Advocate*, a lengthy study of the famous 1610 trial and execution by the Spanish Inquisition of a handful of witches from the mountain village of Zugarramurdi in northern Navarre. This book had a major impact and soon became the best-known work on witchcraft in early modern Iberia. In it Henningsen not only brought to wider attention a highly unusual case previously known through the writings of the American historian Henry Charles Lea and the Spanish anthropologist Julio Caro Baroja, but he also highlighted—even more than his predecessors—the figure of the inquisitor Alonso de Salazar, who after the trial successfully campaigned to convince the tribunal to reject future persecution of witches. Henningsen's Salazar emerged as a hero for the times, an early spokesman for enlightened values in a country long dismissed as a bastion of obscurantism and fanaticism.

Two and a half decades later Henningsen has returned to the fray with another hefty tome on the Navarrese trial. While this second book covers the same ground, it does so in a different way, and with the appreciable benefit of hindsight. Detailed study of this case had long been bedevilled, so to speak, by considerable problems regarding sources. The most significant among these was the destruction in the early nineteenth century of the original trial records, which included more than five thousand (!) folios of testimony. Energetic toil in archival vineyards allowed Henningsen to reconstruct much of the missing documentation in *The Witches' Advocate*. He now offers the scholarly reading public the chance directly to examine the same material. He has edited eighteen major documents in the original Spanish, and has accompanied them with an English translation and commentary in addition to a substantial introduction. The scrupulous presentation of the sources, including underlinings and margin notes, renders *The Salazar Documents* an invaluable companion to his earlier book.

Among the many distinctive features of this trial was its size. Salazar's pa-